
Overrated, overpaid, and over their heads.

THE MYTH OF POLITICAL CONSULTANTS

BY FRED BARNES

POLITICAL CONSULTANTS have sex in the shower with their buxom assistants. They fly around the country in plush jets, which they own. They cleverly manipulate the political system. They strip candidate after candidate of their real personalities and viewpoints, and impose phony but politically appealing new ones on them. Political consultants are almost always successful. Any candidate they're behind has a very high probability of winning, the odds being something like seven to one. Pity the poor candidate whose consultant quits on him. Forsaken by his guru, he is high and dry, and all but certain to lose.

This is the Hollywood version of political consulting in a recent film called *Power*. The consultant is played by Richard Gere, and power is what he has lots of. He is a political Svengali. Campaigns turn on his plots and ploys. Candidates are empty vessels, which he fills. Of course, Hollywood has pushed this line about political consultants before. But in *The Candidate*, a 1972 movie, the omnipotent consultant was crass, dumpy, and played by Allen Garfield, no matinee idol. The candidate was Robert Redford. By the end of the picture he'd become so dependent on his consultant that, having won the election, he asked plaintively, "What do I do now?"

Ordinarily no one believes Hollywood. But with consultants, conventional wisdom imitates art. Serious political writers exalt them just as Hollywood does. O.K., they leave out sex in the shower and the private jets. But the rest is practically the same: consultant chic. "Television and polling have bred a new profession of electronic manipulators," Arthur Schlesinger Jr. warns. Sidney Blumenthal writes in *The Permanent Campaign*, a book about the "elite" corps of operatives, that consultants "have supplanted the old party bosses" and "superseded" the parties themselves. In the May issue of *GQ*, Randall Rothenberg hails "a new breed of political insiders [who] understand the nuances and influence of their overpopulated generation [and] may well change the way American politics is conducted for decades to come." Not to be outdone, David Chagall says in *The New Kingmakers*, which should have been titled "The New Gods," that since the 1960s "a brigade of consultant superstars developed and assumed positions of unparalleled power and influence in the political structure of America." More breathless yet, Roland Perry declares in *Hidden Power*, still another book puffing up consultants, that "with their control over politicians and understanding of the new technology, it is the strategists who, more and more, will dictate the direction of nations and the world."

Wow! This takeover poses a new peril, not only to de-

mocracy but to the entire world. Don't believe a word of this. It is pure myth. Political consultants have not even seized control of American elections. They now work in every national and statewide campaign, and in many smaller races, but their effect on the outcome of elections is marginal at best. And they screw up as often as they do well. Consultants can't turn nerds into U.S. senators. They can't elect people. They can't overturn the laws of politics.

If they can't do that, what can consultants do? Lots of things. They come in four basic types—pollsters, media consultants, direct-mail experts, and strategists. The mail experts limit themselves to fund-raising. But pollsters and media consultants often double as strategists. In fact, pure strategists who don't offer other services—Republican Stuart Spencer is the most famous—are a dying breed. There's not enough money in it. To bring in big bucks, you've got to supply the TV spots. For statewide races, topflight consultants charge \$30,000 to \$50,000, but that's just for starters. They get reimbursed for their production costs, with ten to 15 percent extra tacked on. But the real money comes from the usual 15 percent of the media buy that they get. If a candidate spends three million dollars on TV, that means \$450,000 for his media consultant. Small wonder more and more consultants are getting into media work.

There's a catch in signing up one of the two dozen big-name consultants, most of whom work out of Washington. You don't get their full-time attention, since they hire out to numerous campaigns at the same time. This causes trouble. Candidates want to talk to their consultants more than their consultants want to talk to them. But often consultants' aides are fobbed off on them. Lynn Cutler, running for Congress in Iowa in 1982, fired her media consultant when she couldn't get him on the phone for two weeks. But while they can't guarantee victory, consultants have their specialties. Spencer rode the campaign plane with Ronald Reagan in 1980, advising him over and over how to avert gaffes (usually by saying nothing of substance at all). Pollster Robert Teeter is adept at gauging what undecided voters want. Another pollster, Arthur Finckelstein, can tell you how to get out the hard-core conservative vote.

Consultants can help, but not much. If all goes extraordinarily well, they might add one or two percentage points. Of the factors that decide elections, consultants rank a distant fifth. What's most important, not surprisingly, is the candidate himself. Personal assets matter—a message, skill in communicating it, the ability to keep cool under stress, attractive looks, and so on. If the candidate's an ugly dope, there's nothing a consultant can do to change that. The sec-

ond factor is the political environment. Republicans don't win in Chicago. It's Democratic turf, no matter what GOP consultants do. Next, there's the political mood. A liberal finds the going tougher in a conservative era. Then there's money, the more the better. Finally, consultants come into play. It's certainly nice to have a shrewd strategist, a clever media consultant, and a perceptive pollster. In many races they are indispensable. But so is the guy who handles the campaign schedule, and no one says he's a genius.

Nicholas Lemann agrees with Sidney Blumenthal about the powers of consultants. "They are the new political bosses," he says. "They have put more important politicians into power than Boss Tweed or Mayor Daley ever dreamed of." There's a fundamental misunderstanding here. The old bosses had real power. If you were a Democrat running for president and didn't get the support of Mayor Daley, you were out of luck in Illinois. There was nowhere else to turn in hopes of getting the convention votes of the Illinois delegation. But consultants are interchangeable, and there are many good ones. If you don't get Robert Squier to produce your television spots, then you can turn to Ray Strother or Neil Oxman or Michael Kaye. If you find that Patrick Caddell has been hired to do the polling for a rival, you can sign up Peter Hart or Paul Maslin or William Hamilton.

CONSULTANTS FEED their own mystique. They love to discuss their work, and crave press attention, knowing all the while that this detracts from their candidate. "I was guilty," admits Gerald Rafshoon, Jimmy Carter's media consultant. "I enjoyed the attention." Consultants can be counted on to chat up winning campaigns, and little else. Losers? Mum's the word. Consultants are especially talkative about long shots who got elected. True, there are cases where a consultant catapulted a candidate from obscurity to victory. This happened in the Florida governor's race in 1978, when Squier's TV commercials showed state senator Bob Graham "working for governor" at a different job every day (ditchdigger, bellhop, etc.). Graham was distinguished from the pack of candidates, and won. But cases like that are few and far between. And there were factors peculiar to the Florida race that made Graham's emergence possible. It's a transient state with weak political parties, which makes TV all the more important. Besides, Graham's opponents were duds.

Political reporters, including me, are suckers for tales of consultants' legerdemain. By ascribing election victories to consultants, they explain the secret, behind-the-scenes reality of politics. The uninitiated may think the candidate won. The reporter knows better. The consultants, who happen to be his best sources, were responsible. But there's something overlooked in the puffery about hot consultants and winning streaks. For every consultant on the winning side, there's one (in general elections) or more (in primaries) that worked for losers. If consultants get credit for victories, shouldn't they be blamed for defeats? In some cases, they should. But the press never picks up on this. If stories have appeared about consultants who've lost the

knack and are mired in a slump, I've missed them. I know I've never written one like that myself.

In 1979 Squier was lionized in the *Washington Post* as "the kingmaker of the 30-second spot." He was described as "a political imagemaker riding a hot streak, the hottest streak in his career. Of the last 14 primary and general election campaigns he has worked in, Squier has lost only one." Not only had Squier put Graham in the Florida statehouse, he'd elected a bland fellow named William Winter governor of Mississippi. Winter's chief opponent in the Democratic primary was a 58-year-old spinster, and Squier's television ads played up Winter's closeness to his wife and daughter. Another spot showed Winter on military maneuvers, and noted that "the governor is the commander in chief of the National Guard." These were effective commercials. But the question is whether Squier was pivotal.

Probably not. If he were, Squier could be expected to produce winners in other Mississippi contests. In 1983 he was back—same consultant, same state, same race, but this time his candidate for governor was Michael Sturdivant. Despite spending the most money, much of it to air Squier-created ads, Sturdivant came in third in the primary. The spinster Winter had beaten four years earlier made the runoff, but she wound up losing again, even without Squier's aiding her opponent. More telling still was what happened in 1984, when Winter hired Squier in his bid for the Senate—same consultant, same candidate, same state. Winter was humiliated. In a Democratic state, he lost to incumbent Republican Thad Cochran by 58 to 42 percent. Squier now says the contest was lost before Winter announced. "We probably all did Winter a disservice by continuing to argue that he run way past the point where he had a chance to win," Squier says.

Squier may be explaining away an embarrassing defeat, but he's right. He couldn't make Winter a winner in 1984. And it points up the limitations on his ability, or any consultant's, to affect a race. Winter had hurt his own reputation by lobbying to become chancellor of the University of Mississippi, then rashly rejecting the job when it was offered and announcing for the Senate. There was also a strong conservative and Republican tide in the state in 1984. (Reagan beat Mondale 62 to 37 percent in Mississippi.) Nothing Squier provided in TV spots could erase these factors. Nor in the 1983 governor's race could he transform Sturdivant into as appealing a candidate as Winter had been in 1979. The difference wasn't Squier's work, which is always skillful, but the quality of the candidates. Winter was a better candidate than Sturdivant. He wasn't good enough, though, to overcome an unfavorable political environment and ideological mood in 1984. But how many stories did you read about Squier's losing streak?

IN 1984 the hot consultant was Roger Ailes, a Republican, who got credit for Mitch McConnell's victory over incumbent Democrat Dee Huddleston in the Kentucky Senate race. What did Ailes do? He produced a very funny television commercial that showed a bloodhound in pursuit of Huddleston, who was away from his Washington

duties making speeches for money. When McConnell won, surprised political analysts needed a reason. So they latched onto the commercial. This was only natural. The largest chunk of money spent in campaigns goes to buy TV time. That must mean that the TV spots are the most important ingredient, right? Rarely. Getting on television just happens to be expensive. That's why it takes such a hefty percentage of campaign funds. In publishing a newspaper, the biggest expenditure is for paper. But that doesn't make paper a major factor in the success or failure of the newspaper. Anyway, Ailes got a notch in his gun for supposedly electing McConnell.

Yet the reasons had little to do with Ailes, good as his spots were. Pollsters for Huddleston went back after the race to find out why he lost. They asked which commercials voters remembered. "There was a very, very low remembrance of [the bloodhound spot], like 15 percent," said Harrison Hickman. Three times as many people recalled an ad that nicked Huddleston for poor Senate attendance and junkets. Even that ad had little to do with Huddleston's defeat. He was simply an overconfident incumbent with a mediocre record who was engulfed by the Reagan tide. Huddleston was a bad candidate running in a bad year for a Democrat.

Ailes, meanwhile gets credit for electing McConnell, but no blame for his work on behalf of Charles Percy. A month before election day, the Percy campaign put a strong tax-cutting ad on TV. His Democratic opponent, Paul Simon, dropped ten points in surveys done by his pollster. He was in deep trouble. But the tax ad was yanked. It had "run its cycle," an Ailes aide said. Percy went with another Ailes commercial that attacked Simon for having written a letter to the Ayatollah Khomeini. That ad backfired, and Simon won.

BLUNDERS LIKE the Khomeini ad in Percy's campaign are a lot more common than consultants care to admit. In the 1981 governor's race in Virginia, Republicans nominated a moderate named Marshall Coleman. Virginia is a very conservative state, and Reagan is wildly popular there. Thus Coleman, guided by consultants Douglas Bailey and John Deardourff, tried to run as a Reaganite right-winger. It didn't fly. He lost, the first time since 1966 that a Republican had lost a major statewide race in Virginia.

Pollsters also make mistakes. Polls taken for both Coleman and his Democratic opponent, Charles Robb, pegged Coleman as the winner. In 1976 a survey in North Carolina by Robert Teeter persuaded President Gerald Ford that the Republican nomination was already his. He relaxed his campaign. This allowed Ronald Reagan to pull an upset in the North Carolina primary and revive his candidacy. In 1978 a poll by Patrick Caddell's firm showed Democratic senator Thomas McIntyre of New Hampshire with a solid two-to-one lead over Republican Gordon Humphrey. Nor was there any trend toward Humphrey. This was a few weeks before the election—which Humphrey won. In Iowa that year a poll by Peter Hart a month before the election showed Democratic senator Dick Clark leading 57

to 27 percent. He lost. In 1982 Republicans were delirious about the prospects of winning the Alabama governorship. A late poll by Lance Tarrance showed a dead heat between George Wallace and Republican Emory Folmar. But Folmar lost 60 to 40 percent.

The conceit of many national political consultants is that they have expertise that local consultants haven't mastered. Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't. The 1979 Louisiana governor's race was a laboratory for the national crew. There were six candidates, and five hired nationally known consultants. Squier worked for Louis Lambert, then Ray Strother did. Charles Guggenheim, who had worked for Bobby Kennedy in 1968, was hired by Bubba Henry. Sonny Mouton brought in David Garth. Jimmy Fitzmorris and Paul Hardy also got out-of-state help. But the winner was David Treen, the lone Republican in the race. He used a local ad agency of no national renown. His TV spots were spare and inoffensive.

Another conceit of some consultants is the eye-popping win-loss record. In *Power* Gere boasted of an 85 percent winning percentage. No big deal, says Strother, who produced the TV spots for Gary Hart's presidential campaign in 1984. Strother quotes the advice of rodeo rider Casey Tibbs: "You get on the back of a good horse and hold on." In other words, consultants pad their percentage by taking on the right clients. "I represent a lot of incumbents," Strother says. "Incumbents tend to win." And winning is everything. Consultants rarely are praised for making the most out of a lackluster or otherwise flawed candidate, as Bailey and Deardourff did with Gerald Ford in 1976 and Rafshoon did with Carter in 1980. A loss is a loss in the consultant's world. On his list of clients, Squier names senators who won, but no Senate candidate who lost.

At the core of the myth of political consultants is the notion that they can elect presidents. Nothing could be further from the truth. Consultants actually have less influence on presidential races than any other. The higher the visibility of the race—and presidential contests are the most visible of all—the less impact consultants have. Consultants do best when voters have few sources of information about candidates. In such cases, what is conveyed in campaign advertising fills a vacuum. But in presidential races, voters are bombarded with information. There is no vacuum. The news media cover presidential campaigns in lavish detail. All a media consultant can do is produce ads that go with the general news flow. These may help marginally, but no more. In 1984 there was nothing any consultant could have done to save Walter Mondale from defeat. There was nothing any could have done to cause Reagan to lose.

THE LEGEND WAS started in 1968 by Joe McGinniss's *The Selling of the President*. McGinniss attributed Richard Nixon's election to slick handling by consultants, who closeted him except for staged sessions with voters. On the contrary, this strategy was a spectacular flop. Nixon won in spite of it. His mammoth lead over Hubert Humphrey dissolved as election day approached. If the election had occurred a week later, he would have lost. McGinniss was

flatly wrong, but his book appealed to Nixonphobia and became a best seller.

The legend grew in 1976 with Jimmy Carter's advance to the White House. In Carter's case, the myth holds that he did whatever pollsters said he should, and that his media message was shaped accordingly. Well, not quite. Pollster Caddell was a late addition to the campaign, arriving after the TV commercials had been produced by Rafshoon. The media effort was "90 percent Carter and ten percent technique," says Rafshoon, who has given up political consulting to make movies. "We followed him around for two years and we gave you what he was saying. No political consultant would come up with these lines: 'I'll never lie to you,' or 'I want to have a country that's as good and decent and honest and competent and compassionate and as full of love as the American people.' We looked at the footage we had and these were the lines that were capturing audiences. Who came up with it? Jimmy Carter the candidate. It worked for those times."

IN 1980 the legend was bolstered by Reagan's election. Here was putty in the hands of consultants. Except for the fact that the more they handled, the worse he did. Kept under wraps by campaign manager John Sears, Reagan lost the Iowa caucuses to George Bush. Unleashed, he won the New Hampshire primary. When Sears was replaced by William Casey, a political hack, Reagan's fortunes suffered not at all. In the fall campaign against Carter, Reagan's TV ads were mushy, pointless, and dull. His California governorship was described in a spot in the vaguest possible terms. Carter's ads were riveting, far better than the spots that had allegedly carried him to victory four years earlier. The most effective one showed Carter burning the midnight oil at the White House. But commercials were irrelevant. So were all the consultants on both sides.

The same was true in 1984, except when consultants hogged the spotlight from the candidates. Just as White House reporters cover presidential aides as much as they do the president, political reporters concentrate on the ebb and flow of consultants. This diminishes candidates, who are seen as puppets. Their political message gets less attention. Patrick Caddell's rocky forays into the Hart and Mondale campaigns were widely reported. There's a quip in the political community about Caddell: if you want the consultant to get more ink than the candidate, hire Caddell. A critical moment in Hart's campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination came when his consultants, notably Caddell, put an ad on TV in Illinois without his approval. He tried to yank the spot off the air just before the primary, failed to do so, and ended up looking silly. He lost the primary, and his decline began.

Nothing like the Illinois glitch happens in the literature about the awesome power of consultants. The puffery about the big-name national consultants has created a whole new role for them. No, they aren't bosses, but they are able to make candidates look credible—just by being hired. If a candidate has a team of well-known consultants on board, he gains instant credibility. Political action com-

mittees are more likely to supply money. The press takes the candidate more seriously. When Stewart Bainum Jr., a Maryland businessman, hired Patrick Caddell last year to take a Senate race poll for him, it warranted a full story in the *Washington Post*. Bainum had gotten all he could have wanted from Caddell. Soon he moved on to another pollster.

The fund-raising role is a critical one. Mark Siegel, the chairman of the National Bipartisan Political Action Committee, a Jewish PAC, says consultants are "an indication of the seriousness of a campaign." If a candidate looking for money drops by with a consultant Siegel respects, that improves his chances. Siegel's PAC sends out a critique of every Senate race, which includes the names of each candidate's consultants. Even in House races, consultants can bring money. "If a challenger has been able to attract big-name consultants, it raises eyebrows," says Joseph Gaylord, executive director of the National Republican Congressional Committee. "People are going to pay more attention. PACs are." But sometimes it doesn't work that way. When Linda Chavez left the White House staff to run for the Senate in Maryland, she hired Ed Rollins, who ran Reagan's 1984 campaign. Her expectation was that he would bring in the big donors. However, Rollins hasn't made fund-raising calls for her—he's a strategist, after all—and Chavez has been forced to shave back on his spending plans.

WITH SO MANY requests for their services, consultants spread themselves thinly. "They're getting away from what makes a good consultant: personal attention to a candidate," says Todd Domke, a Massachusetts consultant. Consultants have a limited number of fresh ideas. The same campaign plans and TV gimmicks show up again and again. "Candidates think they're getting a fresh, 150-page campaign plan, and it's been around for 20 years," says Siegel. Candidates who want to demonstrate that they're tough on crime are shown slamming a jail door shut, a crude image that has little impact. In the Alabama governor's race this year, state attorney general Charles Graddick got nowhere until he dropped the jail-door ad in favor of one calling for improved schools. David Garth uses roughly the same style in every campaign spot—cinema verité episodes with written information crawling across the bottom of the screen. It worked in the 1970s, less so in the 1980s.

It's partly fear that keeps consultants in demand, fear that your opponent will get a leg up. If one candidate hires a famous pollster or media consultant, the other candidates have to get expensive consultants of their own. In the end, the consultants nullify each other in most races. But the problem for a candidate is that he's got to hire consultants to achieve this. If a candidate goes to the trouble of running in the first place, he doesn't want to give his opponents even the small edge that consultants might bestow. So he takes on a squad of them as a defensive maneuver. But who knows? The race might be close, and one of his consultants might come up with the one-in-a-million gimmick that gets him elected. It happened once in Florida. (1)